

Press-Telegram (Long Beach, CA)

September 6, 1992

IN SEARCH OF THE AMERICAN DREAM

Author: *Janet Wiscombe / Staff Writer*

The indignities finally piled up too high. For Art and Jacqueline Wooten, life in Los Angeles County had become unbearable.

The deciding moment came on a Saturday morning in 1987. The young couple had left their apartment to spend the day house-hunting in communities near McDonnell Douglas in Long Beach where Art worked as a buyer. Instead, they were trapped in their neighborhood in South-Central Los Angeles.

There had been a kidnapping nearby. Two suspects lay spread-eagled on the street in front of their apartment. Police had cordoned off the neighborhood for several blocks, preventing people from going in or out.

"I remember saying, 'It's time to get out,'" Art says, listing a series of dangerous episodes that culminated in his decision to move to a safer area - drug deals in the alley, a neighbor who'd been mugged, another who'd been shot.

"I got so paranoid, I didn't want to be home alone," recalls Jacqueline, who was pregnant the Saturday morning she and Art finally said, "No more." "I'd go to the mall and hang out until it was time for Art to come home from work."

Later, the Wootens took a Sunday drive to Moreno Valley, a burgeoning new community in Riverside County. They had been looking for an affordable house near McDonnell Douglas for months. Still, they promised each other that the day's excursion was nothing more than that. Under no circumstances would they seriously entertain the notion of doing any serious house hunting.

Their transformation to a new way of thinking was immediate, complete. By the end of the day, they were introduced to the American Dream, a spacious four-bedroom, three-bathroom house on a quarter-acre of land with light gray wall-to-wall carpet and a living room with a sloping, two-story ceiling. The price: \$106,000.

Before returning to L.A. that night, they had become homeowners. And they say they've never looked back.

As he admires his suburban Shangri-La, Art observes with a broad grin, "Out here, there are no police helicopters flying overhead."

Adds Jacqueline, "Kids don't get caught with stray bullets while they're riding their tricycles. This is a comfortable environment for them."

Major migration

The Wootens are examples of a major migration of middle- and working-class families who are fleeing the L.A. Basin to settle in nondescript communities in Riverside and San Bernardino counties where houses are affordable, schools are considered good and crime is relatively low.

Last year, the U.S. Census reported that Moreno Valley was the fastest-growing city in the country. Twelve years ago, its population was just under 30,000. Today it is a sprawling community of tract homes and fast-food restaurants with a population of 132,000, a city that prides itself on its ethnic balance - 57 percent white, 22 percent Latino, 13 percent African-American, 6 percent Asian and 2 percent other - and on houses that sell for as much as 40 percent less than their counterparts in the Long Beach area. The typical family consists of two parents in their early to mid-30s, two children ages 7 and 9 and a family income of \$42,000 a year.

There is, of course, a catch. There are many more big houses than there are good jobs. Seventy-five percent of the wage earners commute outside of Moreno Valley. Of those, a quarter endure three- and four-hour-a-day commutes to jobs 60 and 70 miles away in Orange and L.A. counties.

Commuters who tackle the drive from Moreno Valley to Long Beach, for example, add 35,000 miles a year to their odometer just going to and from work. The American Automobile Association estimates the average cost of such a commute is a cool \$7,541.

Anne Palatino, the regional manager of a nonprofit ride-share company in Riverside County called Commuter Transportation Services, says she doesn't know of anyone who's used the long hours on the freeway to learn a language or memorize a sonnet.

"I've heard that the people on the bus pool sleep," Palatino says, adding that some buses are equipped with TVs and VCRs. "The people in the car pools do more talking. Mostly they sleep, read and listen to music."

Palatino says there are a variety of innovative commuter services in Riverside and San Bernardino counties, including the Telecommuting WorkCenter, an 8,000-square-foot satellite center where 55 commuters can work closer to home. The center rents space to various companies so their employees can work closer to home, and provides equipment such as computers.

Still, for those intimately acquainted with the commute, there is an obvious question: Is it worth it?

Worthwhile ride

Absolutely, Art Wooten insists. For the first 3 1/2 years he lived in Moreno Valley, he commuted to McDonnell Douglas in Long Beach. That meant leaving the house at 3:30 a.m. - that is 3:30 a.m. - and arriving home at 5 p.m.

"It made a long day," says Wooten, founder of the Friendship Christian Fellowship Church in Moreno Valley where he serves as pastor. But he is quick to add, "After commuting for two hours, I'd pull into the driveway and say, 'It's worth it.'"

Two years ago he quit his job in Long Beach. He now serves his congregation full time and has opened a landscaping business to supplement his income.

Gaylene Ball wishes her husband could make a similar move. She's not totally convinced home ownership is worth the long hours her husband is gone. She does like the area, and she does know her neighbors, but ...

"It's lonely," she says.

Ball is a pretty 26-year-old mom. Like many of her neighbors, she essentially is raising her 3- and 6-year-old daughters by herself. To avoid the morning rush hour - which begins long before daybreak, her husband leaves for his job as an electronics technician in Cypress at 9 a.m. If there are no car crashes on the freeway, he gets home at 10 p.m.

Ball tries not to dwell on her husband's commute. Where else in Southern California could the family buy a three-bedroom, two-bathroom home for \$80,000, she asks?

But her tone becomes wistful when she offers, "My fantasy is to have my husband home early enough so we could all have dinner together."

A sense of order

On this Monday morning, Moreno (which means brown in Spanish) Valley is deserted. It is possible to drive for miles through housing developments without seeing a single human. No one is out watering the lawn. There are no lemonade stands, no bike riders, no roller-bladers. Even the dogs and cats have taken shelter in air-conditioned houses.

On this August day, it's 106 degrees. There is nowhere to go. There are few parks, few civic traditions and no city center. Almost all of the restaurants in town have identical

twins all over the country. Almost all shopping is done in chain stores located in faceless mini-malls.

“No one complains that it's a cookie-cutter community,” says Clarence Brown, a transplant from L.A. who is the public information officer for Moreno Valley. “In fact, people are very excited that they are getting their own Price Club and that they have their own Chilies. They like the Pizza Hut and Shakey's. They like the Sizzler.

“That reflects the taste and values of the twenty- and thirtysomething generations that live here. What's here are families. They like family restaurants.”

A trendy, West L.A.-type eatery with a unique menu recently tried to make a go of it in Moreno Valley. It flopped. “The people here are hooked on common-type stores and restaurants,” Brown says.

Despite crime rates far below those in L.A. County, residents joke that the city must be a thief's paradise because all of the houses in town were designed from three floor plans.

Certainly there are few surprises in Moreno Valley. In fact, residents seem to relish the community's predictability. Young families flock here for a sense of order and familiarity, a desire to participate in developing a new community, a deep-seated belief that home ownership is the ticket to security and success.

Says Bonnie Helton Flickenger, a civic activist in Long Beach during the '70s who now serves as a city councilwoman in Moreno Valley, “We came out here because it's clean, the streets are wide, and we wanted to raise our kids in a suburban environment. It's a young, dynamic, diverse community. It's got its problems - we have gangs and graffiti just like L.A. - but I think it's a more ethnically tolerant community because it's new. Neighbors are joined together by economic levels that cross ethnic lines.

“Most neighborhoods are like little United Nations,” she adds. “I think it's very healthy.”

Art Wooten strongly agrees. He grew up in neighborhoods in Long Beach and Los Angeles that were 100 percent black. “The only whites we ever saw were the Sparklets man and the mailman,” he notes. “This neighborhood is integrated. There are a lot more interracial marriages. You see a lot more black kids playing with white kids.

“It is much healthier than the neighborhoods I grew up in and I think the kids will be much more well-rounded.”

Where kids are safe

A couple of miles from the Wooten's subdivision about a dozen teen-agers are hanging out in the city's tired-looking recreation center, a facility that offers little more than a few pool tables and no swimming pool. Most of the youths there today are transplants from places like Carson and Cypress and Compton.

“We came out here from Bellflower because the houses are cheap,” says Travis Clemens, a 12-year-old whose dad works at a bank and whose mom is a pharmacist's assistant at the Wal-Mart in nearby Perris. “My parents wanted to get us away from gangs.

“I like it here,” the young Clemens adds. “But someday I'd like to live in Washington where it's nice and cool. My parents talk about moving to Idaho.”

Their sentiment is common, says Bill Gant, the executive vice president of the Moreno Valley Chamber of Commerce. “People here say their next move is out-of-state.

“If people leave here, it's very unusual for them to go back to where they came from in L.A. or Orange County. They come out here chasing the American Dream and think they can do what their parents did: build up equity. But they can never get enough equity to move back.”

Marylouise Zuppardo, a realtor at Moreno Valley Realty, says the housing market is in a slump, just as it is elsewhere. She estimates the same four-bedroom, two-bathroom tract house that sold for \$110,000 five years ago probably would cost about the same today.

“We've been hit by the recession, too,” she says. “There are a lot of people who are out of work and foreclosing on their houses.”

To some, the population shift to Moreno Valley and similar communities to the east represents all that is vapid about the lust for the American Dream. To others, home ownership is the very definition of the American promise.

But most agree that the exodus out of the megalopolis stems from far simpler, more basic human needs. As Art Wooten observes, “There is not a lot to do out here. So when we have a church picnic or a car wash, everyone comes.”

But of all of the blessings he can think of, one stands out. “Most people come so they don't have to worry about their kids,” he says. “Out here, you don't have to worry about your kids getting to school safely.”

Adds Clarence Brown, “It's a laid-back lifestyle out here. As a friend of mine says, ‘I prefer hearing crickets to gunfire.’”